

# The Russian in Me

by [Paul Illidge](#) (February 2023)



*Moscow, The Festivities, Leonid Brailovsky*

**Juliet** asked “What’s in a name?” Let me tell you ...

My great-great-great grandfather, Nikolai Illyich Preobrazhensky (Pre-oh-bra-zen-sky), emigrated to England after serving as a bridge-building engineer in the Russian army during the Napoleonic Wars, where he made friends with

English soldiers in the allied armies in their respective *corps of engineers*. Bridge-builders performed one of the most important roles in the military of the time. As rivers were so numerous throughout Europe, it was said by some that bridge-builders were more important to the success of a military campaign than generals.

Back in England in the early 1830s, since no one could pronounce, let alone spell Preobrazhensky, Nikolai decided, on the advice of his English friends, to use his patronymic (in Russian tradition, his father's first name "Illya," with the suffix "ich" or "son of" attached) as his surname, "*Illyich*" rather than the tongue-twisting Preobrazhensky. He would call himself Nikolai Illyich, "preserving the Russian in me" he is alleged to have said according to family lore.

His English military friends praised him for his patriotism, however they judged that even the simpler name could strike staid Anglo Saxons as alien-sounding, especially with the guttural Russian accent of his badly mispronounced English arousing still more suspicions. Thus it was suggested Nikolai go all the way—Anglicize his given name to "Nicholas," and his family name to *Illidge*, leaving behind his Russian heritage, at least verbally, in favour of the wider acceptance he'd find in English social and professional circles, a not unimportant factor for Nicholas to consider at the time. He needed to find work building bridges. His children were growing. His wife, who spoke almost no English at all, was straining to learn the language while adjusting to the challenges of life in this strange new land, desperately missing her parents and brothers and sisters, whom she would never see again.

As things have turned out, there have been many times over the years when I joked that old Nikolai might just as well have kept Preobrazhensky for all the grief my family and I and our Illidge relatives have endured with this unusual surname's two I's and L's, its D, its G, and its E: *Ill-dig*, *Ill-id-gee*, *Illage*, *Ill-ridge*, *Ell-ridge*, *Elder-idge* (where the R's came

from I'll never know), Midge, Didge, Widge, Slidge, *Eye-lidge*, *Ill-itch* a few of the more common variations.

I stopped wondering long ago about the mental faculties of what I took to be somewhat educated people who seemed to have a kind of dyslexia when it came to the name Illidge, mispronouncing letters that were there, adding new ones that weren't. Why, I used to kid myself, couldn't Nikolai have saved us later generations of Illidges from the grief and confusion that could so easily have been avoided if he had only opted for the diminutively harmless *Preo*?

The thing is, I've come to enjoy the uniqueness and, in some ways, the obscurity of my last name. Growing up in the 60s and 70s, it was always a source of pride to me that there were only three listings for people with the surname "Illidge" in Canadian phone books: my father, his younger brother in Toronto, and their cousin in Vancouver. There are many more now, of course, but it remains a rare surname in phone directories still.

Illidge makes its appearance once in literature. In Aldous Huxley's (author of "Brave New World") 1928 novel *Point Counter Point*, there is a character named Frank Illidge, an ugly, red-headed, freckle-faced Communist biologist whom most people refer to as *nasty*.

It always meant something to me that the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian composer Piotr Tchaikovsky, whose music I liked and played, had the patronymic "Illyich," as did the leader of the Russian Revolution, Vladimir Illyich Ulyanov, better known as Lenin. And that one of the seminal works on 20<sup>th</sup> century Western education is the book *Deschooling Society*, by a writer named Ivan Illich. As I worked in education for many years, people I met who knew of Illich's work would ask if I was any relation. *Not as far as I know* was my honest answer, though the odds were good that somewhere there was a distant Illidge

connection, possibly going as far back as our great-grand forebear Nikolai Illyich himself.

On Feb. 24, 2022, when the war broke out in Ukraine, whose politics and corruption I had been following since the American-backed Maidan uprising of 2014 removed the sitting president and installed one willing to do whatever Washington wanted done, I wasn't surprised.

During Ukraine's 2014 "color revolution" (anti-regime political protest movements, usually symbolized by the color orange), the U.S. had funded the arming and militarizing of Ukraine through its proxy the Azov Battalion, a 65,000 strong mercenary army unit of NeoNazi extremists who had been terrorizing the Russian-speaking republics of Donetsk and Lugansk in eastern Ukraine for eight years, killing over 16,000 civilians with daily artillery attacks in an attempt to provoke a war with Russia.

In desperation and out of options, the Donbass republics appealed to Russia for protection in late 2021. Vladimir Putin prepared a "special military operation" to free Donetsk and Lugansk of the hostile Azov Battalion presence. Once that was accomplished, the goal was to have Germany and France enforce the terms that had been agreed upon in the Minsk Accords I and II negotiated in Belarus in 2015, Germany and France having signed on as guarantors that the peace terms of the Accords would be implemented and internationally recognized, and the threat of further armed conflict between Ukraine and Russia avoided, hopefully forever if all parties abided by the Accords.

But the media presented none of these readily available facts, nothing about the Minsk Accords (cf. Wikipedia, "Minsk Agreements"), nothing about Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, or François Hollande, President of France having agreed to enforce the peace terms of the international Accords, preferring instead to let mainstream Western media

proliferate a fictitious propaganda campaign against Russia and Russians that was eerily reminiscent of the propaganda campaigns in Nazi Germany against the Jews, only now it was “Russian vermin” who didn’t have the right to exist” (*Telegram* online messaging post).

The American, British, E.U., NATO “Hate-Russia-and-All-Things-Russian” campaign continues to this day—more virulent than ever—as Ukraine finds itself in increasingly dire straits. Russia is biding its time till the ground freezes solid in February, when they’re expected to begin what by all accounts will be a massive winter offensive that will “demilitarize” and “de-Nazify” Ukraine—the announced objectives of Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine—after British prime minister Boris Johnson, on behalf of the West, forced Ukraine diplomats to reject peace proposals with Russia that both sides had agreed to in Turkey in mid-March 2022; peace proposals based on terms in the original 2015 Minsk Accords.

Thus tolerating, let alone supporting Russia, will continue to be unthinkable for any Westerner as the media represents such a view as a wholesale betrayal of Ukraine when there is only one side to take in the conflict with Russia, and that’s the one being championed and proliferated throughout the West by politicians and the media—that a ruthlessly barbaric Russian dictator has invaded a helpless Ukraine and intends to reduce the country to being a province of Russia, which it was for 250 years until 1991, two years after the fall of the Soviet Union when the United Nations deemed Ukraine a country.

I no longer tell anyone that I support Russia in the conflict, if not from a political-military standpoint, then a more important to me sentimental historical one. How can I explain to people the difference? How can I tell them they’re being fed outlandish lies and erroneous fictions rather than available facts such as that the government in Kiev has already sent over 160,000 ill-trained and ill-equipped men to their deaths, with 70,000 to 80,000 wounded and/or missing?

Or the fact that in early December, 320,000 Ukrainian mothers, wives, sisters and daughters submitted a petition to the Kiev government demanding to know what had happened to their men, from whom they hadn't heard a word since the beginning of the conflict last February. Recent attempts to find anything in the media about the petition lead nowhere. Will we ever know—more importantly, will Ukrainian women ever know—what happened to their loved ones?

I have lost friends by voicing my support for Russia. By explaining my attachment to the country, its culture and my own faint family connection to its ancient past. I've stopped relaying facts to them about the actual situation on the ground that I pick up from independent journalists, military researchers and geo-political analysts whose unbiased, reliable broadcasts I follow daily on a series of different platforms: the broadcasts originate in Athens, London, Nicosia, Thailand, St. Petersburg Russia and Washington, DC. Several programs have over 200,000 subscribers. Daily views of their broadcasts often top 150,000, with 2,500 to 3,000 comments posted daily by viewers thanking the journalists for their bravery in broadcasting *facts*.

People of more moderate opinions on the matter ask me why I even bother to keep up with what's going on in Ukraine hoping for a Russian victory when Western governments and all the authoritative media outlets are unanimous in reporting that their "facts" show the Russians have no prospect whatsoever of achieving victory in the war: in the end Russia will be soundly defeated, Putin assassinated, his regime broken up, and the country's resources divvied up among the Western powers according to how much they invested in Ukraine.

"Why do I bother?" I ask in reply, quoting old Nikolai Illyich. "It's the Russian in me."

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**Paul Illidge's** most recent book is *Rsky Bzns* (NER Press). He is also the author of *The Bleaks* (ECW Press), a *Globe & Mail* Best Book of 2014, and *Shakespeare for the E-generation: The Page, the Stage, the Digital Age*. His work appears regularly on Mental Health Talk.info

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